

AT HOME: If You Love Us, Why Won't You Marry Us?

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RETURN OF THE RIVETHEAD

TALES OF ASSEMBLY LINE LIFE

from the forthcoming book by Ben Hamper

NIGHT OF THE QUALITY CAT AND OTHER TALES FROM THE ASSEMBLY LINE

BY BEN HAMPER

Ben Hamper, alias the Rivethead, is a former General Motors autoworker whose periodic reports on factory life began appearing in the Free Press Magazine in the mid 1980s. The following excerpts from his forthcoming book are based on the rivet line at GM Truck and Bus in Flint.

DURING THE SUMMER AND FALL OF 1977, the truck plant was hummin' six days a week, nine hours per shift. All of this overtime added up to one gorgeous stream of income. There was the time-and-a-half money. There was the second shift premium bonus, and there were frequent cost of living adjustments. It seemed like every time I turned around, the paymaster was stuffin' another wad of currency into my waistband.

Any dumb hireling was bound to adopt a sweet craving for this kind of repetitive generos-

ity. I was certainly no exception. I had been poor all my life then suddenly, I couldn't turn my head without bumping into another financial windfall. I'd get up in the afternoon, start rummaging through my drawer for a fresh set of skivvies, and there would be a couple of \$100 bills I'd forgotten about. Howdy, Mr. Franklin. By chance, you haven't seen a pair of sweat socks in there minus a hole in the toe?

These were truly prosperous times at our plant and they were enriching us all. Roger Smith was browsing for yachts, my general foreman was looking at property in the Upper Peninsula, several of my line mates were seen swapping Kessler's for Crown Royal, and I was devoting a miniature fortune to punk records, girlfriends and bar tabs.

It seemed no matter how many we pushed out the door, we just couldn't assemble those fad-happy recreational vehicles fast enough to suit a slobberin' public who'd gone cold turkey throughout the recession of the embargo years. Here they came: pent-up, petro-guzzlin' Americans barging through showrooms on lurking prowl for a chrome-laden beastie to bulldoze down the boulevard. Suburbans and Blazers, the elixir of the hog masses.

We built and we built. Demand was so high that the Corporation would have surely had us working on Sundays if our local union agreement hadn't prohibited it. Besides, six days was

This article is excerpted from "RIVETHEAD: Tales from the Assembly Line," which will be published in hardcover this August by Warner Books.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN LABBE



L'ABBÉ

plenty. A seven-day workweek would have guaranteed a work force that was subhuman at best — a slaughter hut full of foul-smellin' mutants who couldn't tell dusk from dawn nor harmony from homicide.

It was during this boom period that I attended my first of the annual "State of the Factory" addresses. The presentation was to keep us informed on just where our plant stood in relation to efficiency, quality rating, cost procedure, worker attendance and overall sales. We were also to be apprised on the condition of our dreaded dogfight with the Japanese and, our main source of competition, the bullies at Ford with their sleek fleets of pickups and sub-snuff Ford Broncos.

We were herded next door to this mammoth hangar called the Research Building. I have no idea what kind of research went on there, but it's a fair bet that the place was at least a partial foil for all the legions of smock-clad highbrows who weaved around the assembly line each evening trying their damndest to look brilliant and concerned about who knows what. I stuck by Bob-A-Lou, who was an old pro at these corporate hoedowns. He told me to settle in for an hour's worth of propaganda, cheerleading and high-tech gibberish that would gladly float right over my head. We made a quick beeline for the free doughnuts and Pepsi. Whatever was on the agenda, it sure beat working.

"There's the Plant Manager now," Bob-A-Lou mumbled through his fourth or fifth jelly roll. He was pointing toward the stage which, by this time, was completely overrun with about two dozen clones in drab neckties.

"Which one is the chief?" I asked Bob-A-Lou, hopelessly confused.

"The John Wayne look-alike," he replied.

"Oh, yeah," I laughed. "All



The Plant Manager started by back-patting everybody in the galaxy. Up with us, down with them! He introduced a steady parade of weasels who dutifully took their bows. The Plant Manager was a very happy man. Outside the back of the building, I could envision a Brinks truck carting away his company bonus.

that's missin' is the pistol and spurs."

"I can positively assure you of one thing," Bob-A-Lou mentioned while assaulting a new doughnut. "Sometime during his spiel, he's gonna tell us that he will be regularly touring the plant, pausing to listen to any of our gripes or suggestions. He will pledge to be visible and accessible. Just remember I told you so."

"Bulls---, I presume."

"You better know it. In all my years here, I've yet to see his face in the factory. He's probably afraid that he'll scuff one of his cuff links or something."

The pep rally began. The Plant Manager started by back-patting everybody in the galaxy. Up with us, down with them! He introduced a steady parade of weasels who dutifully took their bows. The Plant Manager was a very happy man. Outside

the back of the building, I could envision a Brinks truck carting away his company bonus. We received jelly rolls and warm pop. Up with us, down with them!

He started talking about the enormous popularity of our best-seller, the Chevy Suburban. "We can't even meet the demand for this product," he bellowed. "Do you realize that there are people in New England who have never even SEEN a Suburban!!!" I took a gulp of Pepsi and wondered to myself. Is there no bounds to the human suffering some people must endure?

The Plant Manager's Knute-Rockne-reborn-as-poorboy's-Leo-Buscaglia-on-the-threshold-of-industrial-Guyana rah-rah speech continued for another half-hour or so. As Bob-A-Lou had predicted, the boss started playin' footsie with the

workers: "I plan to make every effort to visit with as many of you as I can. Your input is invaluable to the future of our operations. It is essential that each and every one of us join together in unifying our ..."

"Shut the f--- up," a guy behind me groaned.

The plant manager introduced the man in charge of overseeing worker attendance. In contrast, he didn't seem happy at all. The attendance man unveiled a large chart illustrating the trends in absenteeism.

With a long pointer, he traced the roller-coaster tendencies of the unexcused absence. He pointed to Monday, which slung low to the bottom of the chart. Monday was an unpopular day attendance-wise.

He moved the pointer over to Tuesday and Wednesday which showed a significant gain in at-

tendance. The chart peaked way up high on Thursday. Thursday was pay night. Everybody showed up on Thursday.

"Then we arrive at Friday," the attendance man announced. A guilty wave of laughter spread through the workers. None of the boss men appeared at all amused. Friday was an unspoken Sabbath for many of the workers. Paychecks in their pockets, the leash was temporarily loosened. To get a jump on the weekend was often a temptation too difficult to resist. The Corporation saw it quite differently.

The attendance man took his pointer, which was resting triumphantly on the snow-capped peak of Thursday evening, and, following the graph, plunged the pointer straight down through Friday, a motion that resembled falling off a cliff. Again, there was much snickering.

"Unfortunately, this is not a subject that lends itself to any amount of humor," the attendance man bristled. "Absenteeism is the single largest factor in poor quality. No replacement, no utility worker can perform your job as well as you. Each time you take an unexcused absence, you damage the company along with the security of your own job!" With that said, he packed up his graphs and charts and stalked offstage to make way for the technocrats. The veins in his neck were visible all the way back to the doughnut table.

Hardly anyone tuned in for the technical presentation. It was one long lullaby of red tape, foreign terminology, slides, numerology and assorted high-tech masturbation. Why would any of us give a s--- about the specifics of the great master plan? We knew what holes our screws went in. That was truth enough. Point us toward our air guns and welders and drill presses and save all the partic-

ulars for the antheads in the smocks and bifocals.

"Be sure to help yourselves to the doughnuts and soft drinks on your way out," the Plant Manager shouted as the powwow broke up. It was time to pour ourselves back into the mold and attend to our well-paying jobs. Up with us, down with them.

I MET ALL KINDS OF BIZARRE individuals during my first year at GM Truck & Bus, characters who would prove to be constants throughout my factory tenure. Dementia and derangement were rampant traits. Most of these guys were not unlike myself — urped forth from the birthrights of their kin, drowsy with destiny, uninspired, keen for drink, unamused with the arms race or God or the Middle East, underpaid and overpaid, desperate, goofy, bored and trapped.

It was the rare one who would come out and fib in the middle of a card game about how he didn't really belong here. We belonged. There were really no other options — just tricky lies and self-soothing bulls--- about "how my *real* talent lies in carpentry" or "within five years I'm opening a bait shop in Tawas." We weren't going anywhere. That pay stub was like a concrete pair of loafers. Sit down, shut up and ante.

Our line mate Dan-o was an irreplaceable native up in our neck of the Jungle. He was the master of diversions. His relentless pranks kept us entertained and loose. More importantly, he had a terrific knack for keeping our minds off that wretched clock.

Each night Dan-o would have a new diversion. I recall the time he took a long cardboard tube used to hold brazing rods, painted it all psychedelic, and passed it off to the unsuspecting as a porno kaleidoscope. He told all the guys that if they held it directly into the overhead

lights and looked through the hole, they would get a gorgeous glimpse of Hustler's Miss August. There was never any shortage of volunteers.

There was never any Miss August, either. The victim grabbed the peep-tube, and tilted it straight up to the lights only to get doused with a generous flow of water right in the eyeball. Dan-o also made sure to line the peep-hole with black paint. Not only did the victim wind up drenched, he'd also slink away sportin' a shiner the size of a tennis ball.

Another Dan-o favorite was his "crucified wallet" trick. Dan-o would nail down an old wallet into the wood block floor in the aisle way, flip the wallet closed to conceal the nail, and insert the torn corner off a \$20 bill. Invariably, some guy would stroll by and notice the apparent gold mine. As we pretended

to look the other way, the victim casually glanced around and, feeling unnoticed, swooped down for the wallet only to wind up tumbling on his face or developing an instant hernia. The Jungle would explode in laughter as the victim retreated sheepishly.

The most entertaining of Dan-o's pranks, from a spectator's view, was the "charging tarantula" trap. Dan-o would take fishing line, attach it to a very realistic-looking rubber tarantula, and rig the fish line so that at the flick of his wrist the tarantula would come scampering out from beneath a stock crate near the aisle way. For bait, Dan-o would crumple up a dollar bill and place it right in the aisle. The innocent pedestrian would come along, start to reach for the dollar, and ... God Almighty! ... the bug-eyed terror you would see in the faces of

these victims was enough to send you howling to your knees. After the victim had fled, Dan-o would leisurely reset the trap and we'd await the next pigeon. Man, the time just blew.

IT WAS AROUND THIS TIME that we began hearing a strange new entry into the GM vocabulary. The word was "Quality." The term itself was like some new intoxicating utterance that General Motors had pried outta the ass-end of a golden goose. Quality, Quality, Quality. Suddenly, you couldn't raise your head without having your lobes pummeled with slogans and exhortations hailing this new buzzword. Up until this time, the maxim had always been Quantity. Quantity and Quota. Herd them trucks out the door. Quick, quick ... QUICKER!

Evidently, GM was finally



Howie Makem was to become the messianic embodiment of the new Quality Drive. He had light brown fur, long synthetic whiskers and a head the size of a Datsun. He wore a long red cape emblazoned with the letter Q. A very magical cat, he walked everywhere on his hind paws. A "Howie sighting" was cause for great fanfare.

sniffin' the wind. Americans didn't give a s--- about how fast and how many units you could zoom out the back door. They just wanted a vehicle that didn't begin to disintegrate the moment it rolled off the showroom floor. If they couldn't find something that held together here, there was always the option of purchasing one of those generic-lookin' imports that got about 500 miles per gallon and stuck together as firm as Stonehenge.

Quality represented buyers. Buyers meant sales. Sales meant fat tummies and a fat solid bonus. Quality would loosen those bony fingers off the purse strings. Quality could change the tune and serenade a buyer out of a buck. For living proof, all one had to do was glimpse over at Lee Iacocca, the born-again pom-pom boy of Quality High, who was currently splattering himself all over media land with galvanic jabber along the lines of "We build them right or we all eat dog food!" We gotcha, Lee. Quality was the answer to the illin'.

The GM Truck and Bus plant began fiddling with various quality-minded plots as a means to enthuse the work force. These concepts ranged from the "Build It Like You Owned It" guilt trip to the voodoo scare tactics of "Here Come the Japs to Foreclose Your Mortgage" to the gimmicky "Reward the Good Rodent With a Key Chain" theory. Some of these game plans were so utterly farcical, one would have been tempted to guffaw if it weren't for the fact that it was Your Brain that these follies were bein' foisted upon.

Case in point: the management at the Truck Plant decided what the Quality concept really needed was a mascot. Conceived in a moment of sheer visionary enlightenment, the plan was to dress up the mascot as a large cat. Fittingly,

this rat-in-cat's clothing was to be called Quality Cat. Somewhere along the line, a brilliant mind upstairs decided that Quality Cat was sort of a dull title. Therefore, a contest was organized in an attempt to give the Quality Cat a more vital name.

Hundreds of crafty welders, riveters, screw jockeys and assorted shop rats immediately began clunking their heads in an effort to christen the hallowed cat. Management announced that they would reward the most creative of these entries with a week's use of a company truck. Hot damn! The eventual winner of the contest was a worker who stumbled upon the inspired moniker, Howie Makem. Sadly, my intriguing entry, Wanda Kwit, finished way the hell down the list somewhere right between Roger's Pussy and Tuna Meowt.

Howie Makem was to become the messianic embodiment of the company's new Quality Drive. A livin', breathin' propaganda vessel assigned to spur on the troops. Go ahead and laugh — I know I did. Just for a moment, imagine the probing skull session that took place in some high-level think tank the day Howie was first brought to mention:

"You know, slogans on coffee cups just ain't gettin' it, Bill."

"You're absolutely right, Ted. We need something more dynamic. More upbeat."

"Hey, why don't we give the men their own kitty cat!"

"Kitty cat? Hmmm, I like it! A large kitty cat! Ted, you're a genius!"

Howie Makem stood 5-feet-9. He had light brown fur, long synthetic whiskers and a head the size of a Datsun. He wore a long red cape emblazoned with the letter Q for quality. A very magical cat, Howie walked everywhere on his hind paws. Cruelly, Howie was not entrusted with his own penis.

Howie would make the

rounds poking his floppy whiskers in and out of each department. A "Howie sighting" was always cause for great fanfare. The workers would scream and holler and jump up and down on their work benches whenever Howie drifted by. Howie Makem may have begun as just another company ploy to prod the tired legions, but most of us ran with the joke and soon Howie evolved into a crazy phenomenon.

Of course, this isn't to say that everyone was in Howie's corner. Opinions varied amongst some. For instance, Dave Steel hated Howie's guts. He insisted that having a giant cat parade around the factory espousing General Motors dogma insulted his intelligence and demeaned him personally on an adult level. I remember we constantly argued about Howie's existence. One night Dave had really had it with Howie.

"Christ, what's next?" Dave groaned. "They'll probably bring in Fred Rogers to pass out balloons and lollipops."

"Chill out," I laughed. "You're al-

ways taking s— way too seriously. Sure, having a giant cat rooting us on is totally ludicrous. But, you have to admit, the concept is at least humorous in a pathetic kind of way."

Dave bristled. "I don't find anything the least bit humorous about having some suck-ass in a cat's costume roamin' through my place of work. What they are tellin' us is that we are so retarded growth-wise that all we can relate to are characters along the lines of Saturday morning cartoon figures. Bring out Bozo! Hail Huckleberry Hound!"

"Who would you prefer? Einstein and Thomas Edison? Face it, Howie fits the surroundings."

"F— Howie. F— Einstein and Edison. What do I need this for? Do they really think I'll perform a better job with a huge cat lurkin' over me? If they really want to charge up all these boneheads, why not bring in some Playboy Bunnies? I'm 30 years old, not 13."

"There's only one drawback to your suggestion," I replied. "How long do you think it'd take before some drunked-up redneck mauled one of the Bunnies to shreds?"

"Oh, probably 15 seconds, tops."

"See what I mean? Dave, it's time for you to get on the winning side. Like it or not, Howie's our man."

"Not this guy's. My fondest wish is that Howie gets his tail snagged in the chain gear and is mercilessly ground into Kibbles & Bits."

level reached such and such a figure, we would all receive a lovely drinking glass memento that we could proudly take home to show our kin and prop beside our bowling trophies and eighth grade diplomas. The glass even provided a wrenching of the heartstrings, for emblazoned on the side was the profile of one other than Howie Makem himself.

Christ, I got all choked up and thought I was gonna bawl. With renewed determination, I began knocking the p— right out of each and every rivet that dared rear its shiny little scalp in my direction. Go, team, go! Forget your house payment. Forget your child support. Forget that trip to Cedar Point. Damn it, do it for Howie!!!

Sure enough, the boys and I hit our goal. One night after lunch break, Gino, our foreman, came luggin' a case of Quality Drinking Glasses down the line.

"Thanks for the good job, Ben," Gino smiled. "Here's your cup."

At the same time, one of the utility guys was walking right behind Gino asking each worker whether he'd like to sell his Quality Glass for a buck. He mumbled something about wanting to start a collection. I was shocked. I told the guy to get his rotten currency outta my face. No one could have my Howie Makem drinking glass. The gall of some bastards ...

I figure that the whole investment in these glasses probably ran GM maybe \$35. But, of course, it was the thought that mattered most. After all, when someone works hard all day in a smoky chamber full of sludge, noise, armpits, beer breath, cigar butts, psychos, manic depressives, grease pits, banana stickers, venom and gigantic stalking kitty cats, why not give the guy his own glass?

You can bet your ass that he'll soon be needin' a drink. ■



ONE EVENING, the supervisors began approaching each of their workers with a little mid-job pep talk. The gist was that if the quality